

We're going inside (the belly of the beast) by Othalla

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Summary:

Steve runs, bat at the ready.

We're going inside (the belly of the beast)

Author's Note:

- For [Sholio](#).

Steve blinks and the world turns on its shoulder.

Time is a funny concept, that honestly, he doesn't understand. He *wants* it to be linear. He wants it to go from point A in the present to point B in the future, without any derails or detours. That's the reasonable behaviour of something moving forward at a steady pace, Steve thinks, and that's what time should be, at least according to the clock he carries on his wrist.

(The clock that spins wildly. The clock that Steve doesn't look at.)

Only time doesn't. It circles around and about a point C, where everything converges, spiralling down and down and down – and Steve can do nothing but be pulled to its centre. *Gravity*, Dustin had called it, when he painted Steve's skin with cables and fire. *Gravity will pull you where you need to go*.

Trust me.

Steve hadn't known what he'd meant at the time. There hadn't been *time* for explanations or reasons, how travelling through time worked or why, and so Steve had just nodded as well he could in Dustin's direction, trying to make his peace with the situation known. He remembers smiling. It had been a straining thing that pulled across his face like nails on a chalkboard, but it had been a smile.

Dustin had cried, unsubtle as ever, and Steve had done his best to ignore him.

He had to. There was no time.

(Steve has time now. Only Dustin's not here, so there's not much use to it.)

He reaches out with a hand and lets his fingers trail through Hopper's

face. He's wearing a deep frown, as is his wont. The strip of somewhat hairless skin between his eyebrows put actual valleys to shame, sometimes, Steve thinks, and now is no different.

Hopper's staring at a door like he wants to tear it down, and Steve's not all too certain that he won't. El's behind that door. Hiding.

El's always hiding, even when she's baring her teeth. It comes with the package of growing up in a white room lined with barbed wire and fake smiles.

Steve can't say he can properly understand what she's gone through, raised in a lab and forced to do stuff, but he can relate. God knows his parents deserve some kind of reward for being themselves.

Steve steps through the door and crouches down in front of her, where she's sitting with her face between her knees on the floor. Her hands are curled around her past-shaved head. Her nails are bitten down to the flesh, and there's a trace of blood beneath her little finger that she'd missed when she washed up for dinner earlier. She's thinner than he remembers her most clearly, almost fragile looking, but she's probably not as thin as she used to be.

In a different moment, Steve would have reached out to hug her. But in this one he blinks, and when he opens his eyes again he's staring at a cell and El's not yet El but Eleven and clutching a worn down stuffed tiger to her chest. Sitting on the bed next to her is a man. He has his hand on her shoulder, a white coat on his back, and Steve hates him.

If there was someone to blame, Steve thinks, *for everything*, it'd be this man. He's the source of all their problems.

(The solution is death.)

But what Steve thinks doesn't matter, because some things need to happen simply because avoiding them fucks things up, and that whole tearing a hole through their universe business was unfortunately one of those things. When it's stopped, something else happens instead. Only, they don't know how to predict that one, and so the bad things keep happening, falling down like dominoes, and

they don't stop until Dustin tries again to do the impossible.

Steve's not the only person Dustin tied up and sent flying – he's just the last one.

The world turns on its shoulder, and Steve's spiraling yet again, thrown from one moment to the next in search of the right one. This time, they've circled back ahead, and in front of him, he can see himself, half a decade younger with a nailed down bat in his hands. There's blood on his cheek. His eyes are wide, like a cow on its way to a slaughterhouse. Frightened, but unable to do anything about it, forced to keep on walking.

Past Steve's got four kids standing in his shadow, and one scared and scary racist at his front, there never really was a question if he'd take the hit.

Out of time Steve would take a million hits, if he could change things. As it is, he aches to shield not only the kids, but this younger version of himself, because he's learned a thing or two about self-defense in the years that have yet to come at this time, and he recognizes the innocence in his own face like a wound.

There are only children in this house.

Steve's grown into a man, now. He's not a boy anymore. He knows how to take a hit and keep running.

(That changes things. That changes *everything*.)

Like the universe can sense it, it takes a breath, building up momentum. The red of blood in his young face brightens, the shadows grow deeper, and the smell of old wood and sweat intensifies to an almost overwhelming level and Steve almost chokes on it, even in his untouchable state in the in-between and all around. The current grabs hold of him. It pulls and pushes, beastlike in its savagery, and it feels a little bit like what he imagines death must be like.

Then the moment's over, and Steve's spit out of the stream.

Like fireflies, the flakes of the Upside Down sails slowly through the

air in front of the Gate. It's blown wide open, a giant maw filled with sharp and terrible teeth. Steve stands in front of it, like young him had stood in front of a bully, and he doesn't falter this time either.

The dogs run around him. Circling.

They're afraid, he thinks, absently at the back of his head. They're able to sense that he's *wrong*, somehow, and they can tell he's not simply flesh and bones like everyone else anymore. And that scares them. Flesh and bones are what they crave, what sustains them on this side of the veil. They can see, metaphorically speaking, that he's up for grabs, but instincts as old as space dust pushes them back.

In a minute, they'll run away, relieved for the distraction a bunch of stupid kids will make, as they climb down into the belly of the beast and set fire to it.

The moment comes as if on queue, and the dogs raise their heads, nostrils twitching. Then they run. Suddenly, Steve's all alone.

The Gate trembles before him, almost pulsating. Dustin had said, years in the future, that the space between the Upside Down and their world was not unlike a membrane, not unlike skin even, and that the Gate had simply been a wound on its body. Steve can certainly believe it. The colours, the lights, are certainly life like.

Dustin had also said that the best way to kill something without getting noticed was through internal bleeding.

Somewhere up above him El and Hopper are making their way through the building, aiming for this very spot in order to shut the gate firmly. That's how the story always goes, they've learned through trial and error. El must open a door, and then she must close it.

(Only, this time Steve's not going to be on the right side of the tightrope.)

The bat in his hand is not the same one he carried back at the beginning. It's metal, for one, and heavy.

It's perfectly suited to killing things.

Steve runs.

(It's time to try something new.)